

HOW TO **BUILD** RELATIONSHIPS **THAT STICK**



*The Wonderful Benefits
of Satisfying Communication*

by Azriel Winnett

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How to Build Relationships That Stick The Wonderful Benefits of Satisfying Communication

By Azriel Winnett

Second Edition

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About This Book

John, a young man who had been married for six months, was beginning to feel a little brownd off with the institution -of marriage. He confided to his best friend, Gary, that married life -well, at least, his married life was not all that it had been cracked up to be.

"It looks like you need to speak to someone, John," said Gary, sympathetically. "I mean, someone with experience in these matters. Now, I know a good person, an old man, and a wise one, who'll give you just the right advice. He's brilliant. And it won't cost you a cent."

John didn't need to be told twice. He arrived at the old man's door, knocked, and introduced himself.

"We've been married for only a few months," he wailed, "and already there are tensions."

"Really? In what way?"

"Well, I roll and she squeezes!"

The wise counselor's eyebrows knitted together in puzzlement, but even before he could ask for an explanation, the whole sad story came blurting out.

"You see, I like to roll the toothpaste gently. That's clean, it's efficient and it's economical. But she insists on taking the tube in her hand and giving it a good squeeze" squeeze..."

"No problem!" proclaimed the old man. "Buy two tubes of toothpaste."

One lesson we can learn from this amusing anecdote is that a little imagination and creativity can go a long way towards resolving interpersonal conflicts. Another is the power of "win-win" strategies. We already hear so much about this among people doing business on the Internet, and the time is past due that we begin talking more about "win-win" also in human relationships – not for the sake of petty personal advantage, but to bring more happiness into all our lives.

These are among the topics we'll examine in this book.

Over and above all this, however, our little story illustrates a disturbing fact of modern life that far too few of us are ready to acknowledge. People are entering into all kinds of personal relationships without sufficient preparation or even basic knowledge of what to expect.

When, inevitably, disillusionment begins to set in, not all of these people are as fortunate as John was in having sympathetic, discreet and worldly-wise friends in which to confide. Many are so overcome with anxiety or doubt that they react in inappropriate ways, only to regret it later. Others are very quick to throw their blame on their partners, their friends, the environment, rotten luck – anybody or anything except, of course, themselves.

Ironically, among the primary reasons for this sad state of affairs are basic misconceptions regarding the very nature of relationships. Just one example – people often erroneously think that friendship is something you either have or don't have. You either like someone or you don't. If you don't, that's the end of the story, period.

If you believe this, I don't know how you'll explain a story once recounted by a celebrated psychologist and radio personality.

A man decided to divorce his wife because he no longer loved her. Unfortunately, for some technical reason, he could not file for the divorce for six months. Being a reasonable fellow, he decided to make the most of the situation, and just for the heck of it, he would make a list of all the things he would do, if he truly loved his wife. He then began doing these things. The result? He was soon madly in love with the woman he couldn't stomach a few months earlier.

The romantic notion that love just happens, that cupid either hits you with the arrow or he doesn't, is really just that – a concept that has its place in romantic novels, but hasn't much to do with real life. I'm not denying that chemistry is often a very important component in relationships, but, at best, it's only part of the story.

People who are looking for one-night stands don't need a book like this one. But if you're really interested in a lasting, satisfying, "sticky" kind of relationship, you have to be prepared to work hard. On the first day, the next day and every day thereafter.

But never let this put you off! Not only are the rewards far greater than you possibly ever imagined, but you may well find even the effort itself, with the right attitude and adequate preparation, to be infinitely satisfying.

I must stress that I'm not referring only to marriage or romantic partnerships, but also to the relationship between members of a family, ordinary friendships, and even your relationship with business and workplace associates. Many of the concepts, principles and ideas we will discuss in the following pages have relevance, in some degree, to virtually all kinds of relationships.

Whatever your personal circumstances, I hope you will find here many ideas that will be useful you in your own situation, and that they will help in some measure to enhance the quality of your life, the lives of the people close to you and those with whom you interact daily.

This modest e-book was a kind of natural outgrowth of the electronic newsletter *Effective Communication*, which I wrote and published for two years. The e-zine acquired a loyal following beyond expectations, even though I did little to publicize it. (All the material that appeared in this e-zine can now be found online on Hodu.com – [Your Gateway to Better Communication Skills](http://Hodu.com).

The obvious public interest in the topics I covered there gave me the impetus to write *How to Build Relationships That Stick*.

Since communication is the foundation of all personal interaction, I have devoted our first few chapters to a brief discussion of some principles of effective communication. I try to show how basic communication skills, or the lack of them, can, perhaps more than anything else, make or break a relationship.

I strongly believe that the communication process begins – and ends – within ourselves. The success of a given piece of communication is often determined, in practice, even before we open our mouths.

From there, we go on to such topics as listening skills, validation, empathy, personal attitudes, the destructive power of the Ego, the influence of past experiences, the role of our self-image and assertiveness skills.

It goes without saying that these few pages don't even scratch the surface of these subjects. I hope, though, that this tiny treatise will at least set you thinking furiously, inspire you to investigate further, and perhaps even effect positive change in your life and that of your dear ones.

Please e-mail me at azriel@hodu.com to let me know what you think.

Respectfully,

Azriel Winnett
Israel, February 2008

Chapter One

Receiving Loud and Clear

The great Cecil B. De Mille, goes the story, was making one of the spectacular epic movies that made him famous.

Six cameras were positioned at various points to pick up the overall action. Five others were set up to film the dramatic encounters between the main characters at close range.

According to one version of the tale, the sun was about to set. It had been a long day for the huge cast and everybody else involved. They had arrived at the spot at the crack of dawn and the actors had begun rehearsing the scene immediately. They had gone through everything four times.

De Mille looked around him. Everything looked good. He estimated that there was just enough light to get the shot done.

The great director gave the command for action.

One hundred extras in battle dress charged up the hill, brandishing their swords in the fading sunlight. An equal number came storming down, screaming for all they were worth.

Down below, the principal stars were straining every nerve to turn in the performance of a lifetime, as they acted out their reactions to the battle on the hill.

Fifteen minutes later, everything was quiet.

"Cut!" yelled De Mille, as his face broke out into the broadest of smiles. "That was great!" he enthused, nudging his assistant.

"Sure was, C.B.," agreed the assistant. "It was fantastic. Everything went off perfectly."

Grinning from ear to ear, De Mille waved to the supervisor of the camera crew. He wanted to make sure that the cameras had picked up everything without a hitch.

From the top of the hill, the chief cameraman waved back. He then raised his megaphone to his mouth and blurted out:

“Ready when you are, C.B!”

No prize for working out what the problem was here.

If you expect someone to carry out an instruction or request, you have to make sure that the right party gets the message -in every sense. Even when you're certain that the message is received, it's still not enough. You have to ensure that it is understood.

Misunderstood messages lead to serious breakdowns in communication. We all know that, at least superficially. If nothing else helps, many of us learn the hard way through bitter experience -how crucial this axiom is.

And as we will see later, the problem doesn't always lie with the one initiating the communication.

All too often, a message is transmitted clearly enough, but then all sorts of strange things happen once it begins to penetrate the consciousness of the receiver.

The mental set, expectations, beliefs and the mood of the receiver all play a part in the way a communication is received. Just as critical is the impact of the receiving party's various past experiences -both individually and in sum.

This is why I mentioned in the introduction that the effectiveness of a given communication is sometimes predetermined even before the initiating parties open their mouths.

This is not to deny that the interaction between the participants is crucial to the outcome. But so are factors that are already there even before the interaction begins.

People who are working hard on improving a relationship need to understand this and keep it in mind all the time.

Let's try to clarify this further.

Chapter Two

Tone Down Emotional Noise

I once held a senior position in a large organization. I would work hard for long hours that often included weekends, but I enjoyed my duties and besides, I was dedicated to the ideals of the institution.

Only one thing bothered me. My family was clearly suffering on account of such intense involvement, and I knew I was far from bringing home enough income to make them feel, at least, that it was all worthwhile.

I also knew that, as a non-profit organization, my employer was hardly flush with money. Eventually, though, I managed to pluck up enough courage to approach the managing director and pour out my heart to him.

To my surprise, he seemed to show a tremendous empathy for my situation. He didn't have the power to decide such matters on his own, but he promised to plead my case at a meeting of the financial board the following week. In his eyes, a favorable outcome in the form of a healthy salary raise was almost a foregone conclusion.

The morning after the scheduled date of the meeting, with a few random stomach butterflies competing with a mood of cautious -or perhaps incautious -optimism, I knocked on the director's door.

"Hello, Azriel, how are you today?"

He was wearing his customary warm smile, but after three seconds, it suddenly froze in mid air. I'm not sure that I wasn't imagining it, but his face seemed to change color several times within the same space of time.

But if my boss did lose his composure momentarily, he regained it quickly enough.

“Look, I’m sorry, I didn’t....ahem...get a firm response from the committee yet, but I’m glad you came in. Remember that technical problem we were discussing a

few weeks ago? I think I’ve hit upon the way to deal with it. But first, can you just check out and confirm a couple of things for me...”

But, sad to say, I was hardly in a frame of mind to pay too much attention to technical problems right then.

My brain somehow processed the director’s message in a very half-hearted fashion, and I don’t recall fully what happened after that. I do faintly remember making a perfunctory request to a colleague to take care of the matter for me, but how accurately I relayed the instructions and to what extent they were carried out, I don’t know to this day.

And yet I was known as a self-sacrificing employee, loyal and totally devoted to duty at all times....

Emotional blackouts in varying degrees are obstacles to good communication as real as they are intangible. They’re no less of a barrier than the noise of a pneumatic drill punctuating the conversation of two people in the street.

We would be wrong to think, though, that emotional obstacles affect only the way a message is received. Let’s look for a moment at the other end of the process. Consider this true drugstore incident:

When the phone rang, the pharmacist was shaken to hear the booming voice of a very angry doctor on the line. He demanded to know why the pharmacist had dispensed medication different than the one he had prescribed. Where was the pharmacist’s public responsibility? Didn’t he know how to read properly? How could he be so careless?

The confused pharmacist quickly apologized, but she wasn’t about to be let off the hook so easily. The indignant doctor continued with a lengthy tirade.

His lecture went on and on: how professional obligations seemed to have gone by the board in the modern world, the possibly serious consequences of such mistakes for the patient's health, and so on.

Afterwards, the pharmacist sifted through her pile of prescriptions to find the script in question. To her surprise, she saw she had dispensed exactly what was written there! So it was the doctor who had erred! She rang up and very respectfully told him what she had found.

"Oh well," he said casually, "anyone can make a mistake."

The doctor here certainly doesn't come across as a particularly pleasant character, but human nature being what it is, this episode is not as unusual as it appears to be. I bring this story here to highlight two important points. Firstly, personal bias colors the way we react to events.

In most circumstances, we may respond to a certain stimulus from another person in one way. Following the example in our story, we may be blessed with very sharp critical faculties. When used constructively, that may even be healthy. At other times, it may be highly destructive.

But when we really care about someone (and we all do care about ourselves), then suddenly it becomes surprisingly easy to justify their behavior, or at least to reserve judgment until we know the facts. We tap intellectual strengths we didn't know were there, and find

that we've suddenly become very creative and imaginative.

Secondly, and most importantly, our individual

perception of an event or series of events will then influence the way we communicate with others. And not only when we are communicating that specific event, but even, many times, when we are talking about something unrelated.

Yes, we might think we know these things already, but we need to emphasize and reiterate them constantly if we are to succeed in breaking down the barriers that prevent effective communication -and in turn, inhibit the forming of strong relationships.

In our next chapter, we'll examine some of these barriers more closely.

Chapter Three

You Have to Probe Deeper

Do you remember when, as a small child at a birthday party, you sat wide-eyed and gaping as a magician pulled out a rabbit with a flourish from a seemingly empty top hat?

At the time, the wonder of it all left you speechless and full of awe, but like all healthy children, you grew a little wiser as you grew a little older.

The next time you were present at such a performance, the "magician" might have turned into a "conjurer". You might have enjoyed the show every bit as much, but you now knew that sleight of hand, not black magic, was the name of the game.

It's a great pity that when we finally emerge into adulthood, we tend to forget what we learned about those crafty conjurers who entertained us in our youth.

Yes, our intellects may have matured greatly over the years. But for all that, we don't draw enough on our youthful understanding of the "sleight of hand" concept to make further logical distinctions along the same lines.

More specifically, and simply put, we often don't appreciate enough that things are not always what they're cracked up to be!

The end result is that we fall prone to a kind of mental laziness that allows us to accept everything that bombards our senses at face value, without probing deeper. At times, we may even regress so much that we are still viewing life's events as the small child views his first magician show.

It's not only little toddlers at birthday parties whose mind's are deceived. If you're at all human (and who isn't), it may happen to you almost every day.

A woman was once riding on a subway train when six exceptionally boisterous children burst into the carriage and plunked themselves down on a seat near her. Almost automatically, the woman cringed. She wondered how she would survive the rest of the journey.

Then a few seconds later a gentleman stepped into the coach, trudged in a rather lethargic manner over to the children, and sighing deeply, sat down next to them. The woman relaxed a little. He must be their father, and undoubtedly he would keep the young brats in order.

But to her consternation, the five kids didn't let up in their wild exuberance for a second. They continued to jump up and down and race around the coach, yelling their little lungs out all the while, while the father just sat there in almost a trance-like state, as if deep in a meditation exercise.

Finally, our lady passenger could tolerate this no longer. She went over to the father and berated him in the strongest language she could command for not exerting himself to control his insufferable children.

"Yes, you're right," he acknowledged very softly, his voice almost choking. "They really should behave with more consideration. We're just now returning from the hospital, where their mother died two hours ago..."

This widespread human failing -of neglecting to look below the surface -is the root cause of much of the misery that people inflict both on themselves and upon others. It leads to hasty judgments and overly superficial evaluations that wreak havoc with all kinds of social relationships.

Sometimes, your failure to see further than your nose can be corrected before too much damage is done. Occasionally, however, all the damage control in the world won't earn you forgiveness for an action based on an erroneous assumption.

Jumping to (wrong) conclusions happens on all kinds of levels. Perhaps the lowest level is the case of a receiver of a message understanding a word or phrase in a way different from that which the initiator intended. Often this occurs because the person receiving misinterprets

nuances or inflections in the initiating person's voice. Nonverbal gestures may also be misunderstood..

A person who was finding it difficult to readjust to normal life after a particularly tragic bereavement in the family once sought the help of a professional counselor. After a number of productive sessions, he woke up one morning to find himself in a healthier and more relaxed state of mind.

There and then, he triumphantly promised himself that henceforth he would try to manage without the counselor's support, and phoned her up to cancel his next appointment.

"Done," said the counselor. "Probably it's better that way."

As her client heard these words, he began to tremble with shock, and before very long, began to slip back into a state of depression. He had interpreted this statement to mean that his counselor was losing interest in him. Consequently, he thought, she was relieved to hear that he would soon be off her back forever.

Of course, messages spoken over the telephone, where the support of body language and other benefits of face to face communication are lacking, are often easily misinterpreted. Perhaps the counselor should have been more careful in her choice of words, given the likely consequences of a misunderstanding.

But all she had wanted to convey was her delight that her client had progressed to that point. Her words had been intended to encourage him, not to mask a secret desire to wash her hands of him. "It's better that way" was meant to be a praise for wanting to manage on his own.

As we interact with other people in our daily lives, all the more so with those who are close to us, we need to remain fully alert at all times to the danger of possible misunderstandings.

Sometimes, unfortunately, personal interaction leads to false trails and mistaken perceptions that go far beyond the simple misunderstanding of words and phrases. The consequences can be devastating, as we'll see in the next chapter.

Chapter Four

How to Break a Deadlock

Apart from sleight of hand, one of the most powerful tools in a conjurer's bag of tricks is his ability to distract the attention of his audience.

He might, for instance, spin an interesting yarn while standing at one corner of the stage to force everybody to look in his direction. At the same time, some action crucial to the success of the act is taking place, unnoticed, at the other corner.

Distractions that unwittingly but inevitably crop up in interpersonal relationships aren't usually deliberately staged as they are in magic shows, but unfortunately, they often have a similar effect.

Sometimes this effect can really be devastating, even when we are dealing with two people who are very important in each other's lives. Red herrings and false trails lead to the misreading of facts and faulty perceptions, which deflect our minds from the truth. What we get in the end are points of friction and serious conflict that aren't easily removed.

But this is no excuse to lose hope. Sources of conflict can be removed, if only the will is there. The sole required ingredients for a successful operation are a generous dose of humility and a readiness to put aside preconceived ideas, in order to analyze the situation with a cool head.

A mother was having a rough time with her 15-year-old daughter, who persisted in being insolent and rude despite numerous threats, warnings and punishments. To make matters worse, the woman was expecting a new baby soon, placing obvious further demands on her physical and emotional resources.

A few weeks before the baby was due, the daughter announced that she badly needed a new dress. Her mother wasn't about to go out of her way to give the girl everything she demanded with a click of the fingers. But she appreciated her daughter's urgent need, and offered cheerfully to go into town with her.

"What? Go into town with you?" the girl snapped back. "No thanks. You're fat and ugly. And another thing: I'm not interested in this baby of yours, and I won't help you after it's born."

The mother raised her hand to do what many, if not most, mothers would have done in that situation: reward her daughter for her impudence with a hearty slap in the face.

But something -she didn't understand what it was at first -held her back. Instead, she looked the girl up and down and then straight in the eye, thought deeply for a few seconds, and said softly:

"I see that you're in pain. I love you. Tell me what's bothering you."

The girl looked back at her mother almost in disbelief before bursting into tears: " I didn't really mean to be nasty. It's just that...well, we have so little time together, and we'll have even less after the baby comes."

Now it was the mother's turn to cry, but not for long. As emotions and fears that had been pent up for too long came tumbling out into the open at rapid pace, the two of them were soon laughing together and feeling ever so much better -together.

It became clear, as they talked, that major fears relating to the whole subject of pregnancy and childbirth were preying on the girl's mind. Besides, even though she was looking forward to taking over responsibility for household chores while her mother recuperated, she was beginning to panic that she might not cope. Then again, she was upset that they were already having less time together.

Two family members were here locked in emotional deadlock. Prospects for breaking the vicious circle already seemed remote, even before the current incident.

It might have seemed understandable enough had the elder of the two followed through with an instinctive reaction after the other's latest rude outburst. But the extra fuel that would have been added to the fire would undoubtedly have precluded any kind of reconciliation for a long time to come.

Fortunately, as it happens, the mother used something I would be tempted to call a "secret weapon" -if not that we are talking about restoring love and respect, not making war!

That secret tool is the first step, and the last, in good communication. It's the central ingredient in any effective recipe for building, cementing or mending relationships.

We call it empathy. Let's now begin to explore it in all its aspects.

Chapter Five

The Power of Simply Listening

A small group of heads of departments of a company were travelling together with the CEO in a large motor car. I was one of the departmental heads. We were on our way to a corporate training seminar at a country resort, a couple of hundred miles out of town.

During the journey, the CEO brought us up to date about an ongoing problem that had been plaguing the company for some time. He said that now that we were all together with a long drive ahead of us, he would like to know how we all viewed the situation and what ideas we had for a solution.

As far as I remember, an initial two or three minutes of silence followed as we all turned the topic over in our minds. What happened next was very much like an orchestra tuning up.

One executive broke the ice and began to make a point. But she was scarcely two sentences into her presentation when a colleague butted in -ostensibly to correct a factual error, but almost immediately he went off at a tangent to talk about a completely different aspect of the problem.

He, in turn, was interrupted by a third member of the group, and then a fourth, who raised her voice a few decibels to make sure she came through loud and clear. But the first two carried on regardless with their monologues -and I use that term deliberately, since it's doubtful whether any of us was still listening to them at this stage.

Yes, their words did reach our ears, but that's hardly the same thing as listening. At the end of the journey, I

doubt whether any of us could have repeated back or summarized the suggestions or points of view of our colleagues. A lot of noise, no communication.

A few weeks later, we met in the company boardroom to deal with the same subject. This time, the discussion was far more orderly. We had gathered together under the framework of a formal meeting with the traditional rules, and participants who cut into the speech of their colleagues would have been put in their place in no time.

Yet for all that, I had a very real feeling of *deja vu*.

Everybody spoke with such unmistakable enthusiasm when putting across their own view. But alas, their later comments made it quite clear that while their bodies might have remained in the boardroom while their colleagues were taking the floor, their minds could have been -well, who knows where! Human nature perhaps, but not corporate teamwork at its best.

I think this episode underscores a human failing and social malady that's far more common than many of us would dare to admit. Efficiency in the workplace is one of its victims. Family and friendship bonds suffer from it in even greater measure.

I used to think -as many other writers do -that listening was the most important of all communication skills. Nowadays, I realize that the ability to listen is only part of the story. It is but the first step in the all-important process of creating and sustaining empathy.

Yet, without that critical preparatory step, the rest simply cannot follow.

In fact, there are times when the simple act of listening -active, sincere and wholehearted listening - can, in and of itself, work wonders you would not have dreamed of.

Dr Mort Orman, a stress counselor, once led a weekend communication seminar for a group of experienced physicians. It was held on the premises of the hospital where they worked

One doctor was a rather reluctant attendee. He showed up only because his department head had pressured him to do so.

At one session, participants were paired up with partners. One member of each pair was asked to play the role of a patient with a problem. The partner played the role of physician or counselor.

The catch was the "doctors" weren't allowed to do or say anything. Their job was just to sit and listen, while their "patients" described their complaints and thought aloud while trying to work out their own solution.

Now, to tell a doctor to just sit there and listen -without as much as thinking what to do - is usually asking an awful lot. But the response of our reluctant participant took everyone by surprise.

At the end of the experiment, when everyone was sharing their insights and experiences, he raised his hand and announced enthusiastically: "What I learned from this exercise is that I almost never listen to my patients! I'm mostly paying attention to the thoughts in my own head, and I never really appreciated this until today."

Apparently, this man was so excited by his new awareness of self, that whenever there was a short break in the remaining seminar proceedings, he would rush upstairs to practice listening to his patients.

He would sit on the bed, ask a few questions, and then listen intently. So impressed was he with his newly-found power -which he had possessed, without knowing it, all along -that he would arrive late for the start of the following session.

For the first time, he felt he really understood what made his patients tick -or why they weren't ticking, depending on which way you look at it.

Yes, if doctors would listen to their patients better, they would be better doctors. If schoolteachers would pay more attention to their pupils, they'd be better schoolteachers. (The reverse, surely, hardly needs mentioning!) Better listening in the workplace would mean greater productivity.

But nowhere does the inability or unwillingness to listen have more far-reaching consequences than within the confines of the family unit, as we'll see in the next chapter.

Chapter Six

First Barrier to Intimacy

Imagine this scenario: late one afternoon, Jill, a young newlywed, walks out of her third floor apartment with a bag of garbage in her hand, to deposit it at the dump outside. Her lively mind being preoccupied with a thousand and one things, a little tear in the bag escapes her notice.

As luck would have it, a very public-spirited neighbor on the floor below walks out of her apartment just at the worst time. Her eyes are sharp, but her tongue is even sharper. The verbal onslaught that follows leaves an unsuspecting Jill aghast and speechless.

"Did I really commit such a terrible crime?" Jill asks herself, as she reels under the attack of the self-appointed guardian of cleanliness in public areas. But she takes comfort in the knowledge that her loving and coolheaded husband is due home within the hour.

"For sure, he'll give me all the reassurances I need and I'll soon get my self-esteem back," she thinks, almost subconsciously, as the color returns to her cheeks.

But little did Jill know then that on that very afternoon her new life partner, Jack, had been involved in a nasty altercation of his own. An unexpected showdown with the boss had almost persuaded him to walk out of the job.

He steps into what he believes will be a haven of serenity that will be the perfect balm for his shattered nerves. The words and sobs that tumble out from his distraught wife's mouth in rapid succession are hardly the remedy that he had in mind.

Jack wants nothing more than to be seen as a good husband, and he tries to feign as much interest as he can. But he's only human, and it's only a matter of minutes before he can no longer disguise the fact that his mind is in a different place altogether.

Understandable, maybe even justified? You may well think so, but let's assume that Jack had not been caught up in a bitter scrap, but his day had been mildly stressful, as many working days turn out to be. Can we be sure that his reaction to Jill's immediate emotional need would really have been much different?

And let's imagine that he had actually enjoyed a particularly good day: perhaps his boss had praised him very highly for his exceptional contribution to a company project. He arrives home and Jill begins her recital.

Being the astute young man that he is, and moreover, being in a decidedly upbeat frame of mind, he is fully confident he has pieced the whole thing together by the time Jill is only two or three sentences into her story. He cuts her short:

"OK, relax. What's the big deal, really? I'll take care of that busybody!"

"Great, but ...maybe what she said about me was right? On the other hand, don't other people make the same mistakes? Do you really understand how I feel..."

"For Pete's sake, enough already! By the way, do I just have something to tell you!"

In recent years, many experts have written at length about the kind of tension in communication we see here.

One authority calls men's talk "report talk", while woman's talk is mainly "rapport talk." In other words, men talk for a purpose: to exchange information, to impress others, or to maintain their status. Women's talk on the other hand, is almost an end in itself: if there's a purpose, it is to create intimacy.

Of course, this merely describes the common situation, and it doesn't mean that we don't have report-rapport conflicts between two men or two women. In any case, it's not the often-quoted distinction between men and women's communication styles that I want to emphasize here.

Rather, I devised this imaginary scene to illustrate some other very important facts.

Subtle strains can develop in the best of relationships when the parties, however committed they may be, aren't sensitive enough to each others needs.

Needless to add, this often happens because the one who is suffering simply fails to communicate his or her need to the other party. This can happen for a variety of reasons, and we'll explore some of them later in the book.

But what can be worse is when one partner does in fact communicate, but the other fails to listen. This is not always because the guilty party is unaware or unwilling, or is impatient by nature, or is just plain stubborn. It could also be because he or she just hasn't yet mastered the necessary skill.

For a skill it definitely is, even though we may think of it as something as natural as breathing. Like any other skill, competency in listening is acquired through ten percent learning and 90 percent practice.

And the first and most important thing to learn, and later to practice, is to carefully remove all barriers that interfere with or inhibit the listening process. These may be external -background noise and distractions in the immediate environment -and internal, such as bias, prejudice and preconceived notions, or they could be unrelated thoughts and preoccupations that are competing for your attention.

"Conversation in the US is a competitive exercise in which the first person to draw a breath is declared the winner," a wag once wrote.

Presumably, he was an American, but this observation probably holds good in many parts of the modern world. Any society, community or family unit working towards a change in the status quo is particularly blessed.

But as we stressed above, a good listening technique should be only the first step in a more complex chain of events. It's great when you go out of your way to understand how others are feeling, how they perceive a given situation, what is really troubling them so much.

However, without belittling what you've already accomplished -and we see from Dr Orman's story how much can indeed be accomplished that way -listening is normally a part of the means to be a more important end.

Let's proceed with our examination.

Chapter Seven

Closing the Feedback Loop

In the last chapter, we met a young lady with a problem. Not everybody would have perceived it as such. Nevertheless, Jill's unfulfilled need to relieve the feeling of outrage, the hurt and bewilderment and hurt welling up inside her, was, in her eyes, as real a problem as any.

By implication, we chided Jill's husband for letting his own frustrations and impatience stand in the way of his giving her the sympathetic ear she craved for.

If only he had just listened carefully, without allowing distractions, to what she had to say! This would have been the first step towards helping her bounce back to her normal vivacious self after the unexpected attack on her self-esteem.

But probably, as I pointed out, only a first step.

Normally, once you go out of your way to understanding how others are feeling, how they perceive a given situation, the fears and doubts that lead them to react in the way they do, the process doesn't stop there. Well at least, it shouldn't.

Most likely, you will respond You'll communicate back to the other parties your awareness of their feelings and perceptions, your appreciation of their hopes, doubts and fears.

You may not always agree that their position is justified. But you'll acknowledge the reality of how they perceive things. You'll express your understanding of their position.

If you do, you will have created or closed what some writers like to call a "feedback loop."

To close a feedback loop requires validation of the message your opposite number wants to convey to you. You might disagree with its assumptions or conclusions, but at least you will recognize the reality of the other person's point of view, as well as of the circumstances that gave rise to it.

Here is a true incident to illustrate what might happen when a feedback loop is not closed.

It is a very extreme example , and it is very far from a pretty story. But it does give us something to think about.

During World War Two, one cattle car after another, transporting human cargo -under conditions far worse than those under which the cattle, for whom the trucks were originally made, are normally conveyed -arrived at the Auschwitz death camp. Terrified, naked people were driven with whips into the gas chambers.

But two young men managed to escape under a pile of clothing that was being carted away in a truck. Even more than the desire to save their own lives, they were motivated by the wish to warn their fellow Jews of the incredible scenes they had witnessed with their own eyes.

Unfortunately, hardly any one believed them. The few who did were silenced as being crazy or lacking in faith. Eventually, both young men committed suicide.

Indeed, an extreme, most tragic case. Of course, we cannot condemn. Who knows how we would have reacted had we been the listeners?

But shouldn't we at least understand the added pain of a spouse, child, friend or fellow worker who shares with us something weighing very heavily on his or her mind, and then finds that even though we might put up a show of listening, our minds are light years away?

And to rub salt into the wounds, when we are finally drawn back to earth and do decide to visibly respond, more often than not it's with a glib, perfunctory: "Don't worry, everything will be OK!"

What we usually don't realize is that such a response can be like pulling out a chair from under someone's feet!

This is no exaggeration. It's what's likely to happen when you express a feeling or idea and the person you are speaking to contradicts or rejects it. When the emotion happens to be anxiety, sorrow, fear or the like, the rejection can be extremely painful.

And surprisingly, the pain of rejection can be even more profound when you know that the other party has good intentions and certainly bears no ill will towards you.

Let's see how.

Chapter Eight

When Minimizing is Maximizing

Sometimes you share something weighing heavily on your heart with a friend or relative. Of course, she has no malicious intent, and she tries to offer you some encouragement, often firmly believing that she has succeeded!

Yet, in spite of herself, she fails miserably. You are left feeling even worse. A young mother once visited an older woman and confided how she felt trapped in her house all day long.

"I'm so depressed," she wailed. "I resent my children and snap at them when they make demands. I think about death all the time."

"Nonsense," retorted the older woman, "these are the best years of your life! What's wrong with you? Don't you appreciate how wonderful it is to have healthy children? You're ungrateful, selfish and spoiled."

Did the younger woman feel comforted or inspired? Of course not. She fled the home of her hostess in tears.

A prolific writer on this subject, Miriam Adahan, relates in her book *It's All a Gift* how a friend's eight-month-old baby was undergoing treatment for cancer. Mrs. Adahan sat with the anxiety-stricken mother for hours, hearing one visitor after another say: "Don't worry. He's going to be just fine."

When they were finally alone, her friend looked at her through tearful eyes and said:

"Don't they know how much their optimism hurts me? Don't they realize that they aren't letting me talk about what's most on my mind -that he may not get better? It's like someone putting a hand over my mouth and suffocating me. I have to lie and smile and say over and

over, 'Of course everything's going to be fine', which only makes me feel worse. Why can't these people stop with their optimistic drivel and just listen a little?"

While you'll always find a few folk who take pleasure in being deliberately abusive, most people certainly don't mean to be cruel when they give pat answers. Why do they do it, then?

Sometimes, the reason is quite simple. Their hearts are in the right place, but they lack the sensitivity to realize that by minimizing people's pain, they maximize it.

When they respond to a friend's outburst of anxiety or sorrow with: "You'll feel better tomorrow," or: "Don't worry, time heals!" they don't know that they may be giving the message: "There's something very wrong with you for complaining when there's nothing to complain about!"

The well-meaning advice: "Just take a hot bath and you'll perk up!" could be interpreted to mean: "Why are you talking to me? You should have been able to figure out the solution for yourself," or: "Well, other people seem to manage in these situations."

Another common reason for negative, invalidating responses -and sometimes for just no response at all -is to cover up for our feelings of inadequacy or despair. Sometimes, we genuinely do want to show the other party that we care, but we just don't know how! Many of us, when somebody close to us is undergoing a crisis, are overwhelmed by such feelings of helplessness that if we do respond at all, we do so in a way that turns out to be inappropriate.

For example, a woman is waiting the results of a biopsy after her doctor suspects a malignancy. She is scared stiff, but her husband insists that there's absolutely nothing to worry about. His assurances don't make her feel any better; on the contrary, a growing feeling that she's now on her own increases her sense of panic.

Eventually -if she is wise -she turns to him and says: "I appreciate your trying to cheer me up. But you know, it just makes me feel more alone. If you would validate me, just give me some sign that you understand my fears, I would feel better."

It might then come as a big surprise if her husband confesses:

"You know something, I also feel alone. I guess I'm also terrified over the tests. So it's much easier to fool myself that there's nothing to be concerned about anyway, and I make you believe it too. You're right, it doesn't help either of us. The reality is I do know what you're going through. Probably everything will indeed be OK, but even if not, I'm standing right behind you..."

If someone important in your life insists on invalidating you whenever you open your mouth (or even if less often!), try using the same technique as the lady with the suspected malignancy tried with her husband. Tell your friend or partner what you would have liked him or her to have said in a specific situation.

Chances are you'll be pleasantly surprised how quickly the message gets through. (If, despite your best efforts, nothing seems to help, don't despair. We'll have something to say about such cases later.)

Closing feedback loops is essential for the survival of even a casual friendship, let alone a relationship you are trying to deepen and make more meaningful. Wherever people feel free to share their deepest feelings, secure in the knowledge that they will be understood and accepted, the ground is most fertile for the growth of trust, respect and love.

A word of caution, though. If you are making a validating statement almost as an automatic reflex, you might be asking for trouble. Effective listening, as we described it in the last chapter, has to precede any attempt to create a feedback loop.

Two people can have the same experience and yet react incompletely opposite ways. Positive but knee-jerk responses can hurt just as much as negative ones. Strangely, sometimes even sympathy can be perceived as invalidation. Without a serious and unhurried attempt to see an event from the point of view of the person you're interacting with and to understand exactly why it moves her as it does, your best efforts can backfire.

Now we must look more closely at how we can arrive at such an understanding in practice.

Chapter Nine

Immersing in Another's World

In Chapter Four, we met a "difficult" teenager embroiled in an emotional tug-of-war with her expectant mother, who managed, when all seemed lost, to break the deadlock with a "secret weapon". We called it empathy.

We have just been talking about validation. Empathy is, in effect, validation in its most intense form. It's about closing a feedback loop in high gear.

Empathy is born when you listen, not just with your ears, but with the depths of your heart. Empathy flourishes when you push aside your own interests without necessarily surrendering them -to immerse yourself in the world of another.

Empathy is the very essence of authentic love. It is the primary medium through which loves works such wonders in this world.

Many people confuse empathy with sympathy. My dictionary defines "sympathy" as "a sharing of another person's sorrow or trouble." Another common definition is: "a feeling or an expression of pity or sorrow for the distress of another."

Now, empathy surely includes the concepts of sharing and pity, but even if you knew almost nothing about empathy before opening this book, you will probably sensed by now that it goes much, much further.

According to my dictionary, empathy is "the quality or process of entering fully, through imagination, into another's feelings or motives." (Other dictionaries will give their own definitions, but they should all come down to the same thing.)

In the fullest sense, empathy implies putting yourself into other people's shoes, or even getting under their skin, so that you can really understand their pain, fear -or more positively -their fears.

In brief, empathy is sympathy plus (that is, plus a lot more).

Mary is a housewife -or home manager as some would prefer to call it -with a brood of healthy little children. Maybe they're a little too healthy, for keeping them in check is far more than a full time job on its own. She's also trying to set up a home business, and, as if that's not enough, has involved herself in various community projects.

Her husband comes home at the end of a long. Long day. Of course, she would have loved to give him the warm welcome he deserves, but all she manages to utter, and then with difficulty, is a plaintive "Phew, am I exhausted!"

Her spouse looks at her for a moment with a certain measure of compassion, then responds gently but firmly: "I've told you before you're taking on too much. Half of the work you do is totally unnecessary."

Now, in some ways, Mary may be a little better off than the poor woman who was repeatedly told that her medical fears were unfounded. Mary's husband, at least, has not swept her problem under the carpet.

But for all that, just like her counterpart in the other story, she doesn't feel any better. On the contrary, she feels worse..

This does not mean that, some other time, she would not have appreciated her husband's well meaning advice. But certainly not now. At this moment, what she was longing to hear was something like: "Yep, you look so tired. It must have been a really rough day. Why don't you relax a little while I attend to the kids?"

Mary, fortunately, is a mature and emotionally stable adult. She understands her hubby's good intentions. Most likely, she won't take the whole thing too much to heart.

But a young child, for instance, might have been far more vulnerable. Actually, it's quite surprising how the Mary's of this world often don't give their own children the understanding they expect from others.

Let's say you want little Johnny to drink up his milk, his juice, or whatever else you want him to imbibe. You believe it's good for him.

"Yikes! This stuff tastes awful!" he protests.

How do you react? Do you tell him, "Aw..come on...everybody thinks its delicious!" or perhaps, "Don't exaggerate, it's not so bad!"?

If you do, what's the inevitable outcome? If you've been a parent for long, you know yourself. Parents with experience know that to stand any chance of success, they have to face facts. They have to respond in a different way:

"The milk tastes bad to you?"

Excellent! But what's happening here?

The parent hasn't stated that she agrees with the child. But in five or six words, she has acknowledged how she feels. She has validated his concern. Having come this far, she can continue:

"I know it's not nice to drink something you don't like. To be honest, I wouldn't like to either, so I understand that it's unpleasant. But the point is, we want you to grow up healthy and strong. Let's put some flavoring in it so it will taste better."

Here we see a negotiating strategy simple in essence, but with countless applications in interpersonal relations. We also see that it's a strategy anchored firmly in empathy. That is the secret of its successes.

In the next chapter, we'll try to understand a little better how this works.

Chapter Ten

Empathy is King!

It's a sad commentary on our society that it has taken tragic upheavals in our public schools for educators to give priority to the teaching of empathy skills.

Horrible incidents, in which students hurt others through violence, have precipitated a worrisome conclusion: children who have been teased, made fun of, harassed and put down, finally reach such levels of frustration that they explode in acts of violence.

Better late than never, of course, and thankfully, many teachers are now turning to the disease rather than the symptoms. They are trying to reverse the conditions that lead to someone feeling such emotional pain and hopelessness in the first place. They are doing this by training their charges to vicariously feel what their classmates are feeling.

In the work environment, too, we often see that an absence of empathy has a crippling effect. Few other things have the potential to impact so negatively on productivity and performance.

I was brought up in South Africa, where paternalism or patronization towards the underprivileged class used to be, unfortunately, a common behavioral pattern.

Communication with subordinates -if they happened to belong to this unfortunate stratum of society -was often limited to abrupt commands that were either loud and offensive, or pretentious and patronizing. Housewives would sometimes insist on being addressed by their domestic servants as "Madam." They would issue such inane instructions as "Madam would like some tea now...please bring it to Madam."

The hapless servant, long accustomed to being treated as a child, would often show his or her insecurity by being excessively polite or flattering. He would then be accused

of hypocrisy or calculating behavior. If on the other hand, he would speak confidently and correctly, he would be branded as an upstart, showing impudence and arrogance.

The amazing thing was that the employer, as far removed from the servant's fears, aspirations and uncertainties as the moon is to the earth, would scratch his head and wonder why the poor laborer never took any pride in his work.

We have seen that people trying to cope with particularly harrowing experiences in their lives, often get very upset when friends or loved ones are not empathetic enough to validate their anxieties.

"If only folk would acknowledge the truth, rather than showering me with glib reassurances that everything will be OK, I'd feel much better," a businessman who had lost hundreds of thousands in a stock market crash confessed.

I'd like now to tell you a true story that's especially fascinating because it seems, at first glance, to directly contradict the principle of validating people's concerns.

However, if you read it carefully and think about it for long enough, you'll surely realize that it's a classic illustration of real empathy. If you don't agree, perhaps you haven't truly grasped what the concept means.

A high-ranking judge once suffered a sudden heart attack in the middle of a litigation in court. When he arrived at the emergency ward, a doctor, who knew and respected the very eminent new patient, examined him.

The judge, completely overwhelmed, anxiously asked the doctor about his condition.

"Nothing to worry about at all", replied the doctor, soothingly. "You are just overworked. You have to rest up."

At the end of a very protracted examination, the staff brought in a stretcher along with some very ominous looking medical apparatus. The judge was then hooked up to equipment to which all sorts of tubes and gadgets were attached.

The attendants pushed him briskly down a long corridor and straight through a doorway above which hung a bold sign: "Strictly No Entry -Intensive Care Ward."

The judge, of course, was nobody's fool. After all, his very vocation involved critically analyzing situations every day and ferreting out the truth.

When the doctor came over to him again, his learned patient asked him pointblank: "Why did you deceive me?"

"You really aren't very sick," answered the doctor, surprisingly. "But I'm confronted with dozens of ethical and legal questions every day, and I have no one to ask. I thought it would be nice to have you near me for a while, so you can answer my questions!"

"And why are all these fancy machines attached to me?" asked the judge very skeptically.

"Do you need to have a nurse run over to you every minute? This way, she can see everything from her desk. And anyway, what difference does it make to you?"

The judge was in hospital for three weeks, but he responded well to treatment. After his discharge, he recounted his experiences to his friends and colleagues:

"The doctor continuously and consistently lied to me," he told them. "But his lies cured me more than all the medicine they gave me."

Empathy at it's finest!

The course of any human being's life is inevitably punctuated with suddenly-occurring or chronic problems, tensions, major or minor crises of different kinds. If a person is part of a relationship of any kind, his or her peculiar tensions, or personal handicaps and difficulties, cannot but impinge on that relationship.

How the partners relate to those tensions and stresses will have a critical influence on how productive or satisfying the relationship will turn out to be.

This applies whether we're talking of a relatively casual relationship of work associates, the relationship between friends, or a relationship on a more intimate level.

Whichever it is, empathy is the oil that turns the wheels.

In a very real sense, empathy is king!

Now we are ready to investigate how we can apply all this in practice. We'll begin with a close look -hopefully, not too close for comfort -at the institution of marriage.

Chapter Eleven

Pleasure – Instant or Lasting?

Joe and Sue were successful professionals who had been married a short time. They were busy settling into the dream house that they had bought in the neighborhood where Joe had been living for most of his life.

Whereas Joe's daily routine had remained pretty much unchanged, Sue's changed dramatically. A dedicated career woman of many years standing, she had taken leave of absence from her executive post to set up home. The neighborhood was entirely new to her.

Yes, Sue was enjoying her new role very much, and yes, she cared for her new husband more than words can describe. But the change overwhelmed her. Against her better inclinations, she found herself longing for the old routine. Willy-nilly, the feeling grew so strong that one day she announced to Joe that she wanted to leave -and not just for a few hours.

Without hesitation, Joe asked her very firmly to sit down, looked her straight in the eye, and said: "I'm not letting you go anywhere! We'll work this out together."

Now, in other circumstances, Joe's quick and decisive action could have been interpreted as a maneuver to assert authority.

But this was not a control issue. It was a case of one party telling the other: "Look, I'm fully committed to you and to our partnership. Nothing in the world can change that. Let's put our heads together and we'll find a solution that works."

As it turned out, both of them found this moment of truth very liberating. Secure in Joe's commitment to her and their marriage, Sue was able to lift up her eyes above the barrier of her impulsive panic. She went back to work

part time. Fred found ways to incorporate more time for his wife into his schedule. From that point on, things only got better.

May I digress slightly for a moment?

The next couple of chapters will focus on the marriage relationship. I know that marriage may not necessarily be the "in" thing in some sectors of society nowadays.

For your part, you may possibly view the marital bond as a fast vanishing relic of a bygone era, rapidly being replaced by the more fashionable -and allegedly more "practical" -custom of "shacking up". Isn't it just great to have all the pleasures and privileges without the corresponding commitment?

You should be aware, therefore, that I'm a big fan of the classic institution of marriage. I really believe in it. I go as far as to assert that it's the cornerstone of a stable society, or the pillar on which it rests. That is to say, eliminate marriage, and society itself will eventually crumble. If you really open your eyes, you will notice that it's beginning to happen already.

However, I'm not here to preach to you or convert you.

If you agree with me, fine. You'll know as well as anybody that beauty is really great, pleasure is terrific. But you'll know something else in addition: if you want an intimate relationship to last, to be meaningful, to grow stronger rather than weaker, you also need commitment.

There's just no other way.

Sure, you will also know -let us not deny it -that even with all the commitment in the world, a marital relationship is not the fairy tale that you dreamed about in a previous, more naïve, life. Who works hard in fairy tales? And marriage is hard work. Very much so.

Nonetheless, if you've been active in the trenches long enough and have survived a challenge or two, you don't need any convincing on the eventual supreme delights of a sound marriage partnership. Ultimately, it gets better than the most romantic fairy tale. A hundred times better.

But if you don't quite see eye to eye with me on this score, that's also fine. I believe you'll still find here food for thought to apply to your own situation. The marriage bond may be – in my view -the relationship par excellence, but you should find the ideas and insights we're about to discuss here largely relevant to other types of relationship as well.

Take commitment. During your schooldays, you probably benefited from all kinds of friendships. You had pals whose company you enjoyed on the occasional night out in town or who played in your sports team. Your contact with them may have been sporadic and your relationship with them relatively superficial. But with other friends, it was different. In good times and bad, they were there with not only with you, but for you!

Twenty years or half a century down the line, which of these former classmates would you love to meet up with again, if you were given the opportunity?

We're all well aware, too, of commitment's crucial role in business and the workplace. We don't give a dog's chance to a company that's not fully committed to its customers. Not any less important is the strong mutual feeling of loyalty and commitment that should exist between the company and its employees. The benefits to both are obvious and can hardly ever be overestimated.

Coming back to our story, Sue's perceived dilemma, her panicky feeling that she was trapped in a situation she hadn't bargained for, is not at all untypical. The doubt or panic comes in different forms. Some of us experience it early in marriage, and others much later. Probably it all sounds familiar to you.

And if truth be told -it's all perfectly natural!

Perhaps the whole world admires your wife for her talents and her charm, but frankly, you no longer understand what the fuss is about. Perhaps your husband is loyal, dependable and ready to fulfill your every whim, but oh, he's so unexciting. In other case, not quite what you feel you signed up for on the day of the wedding...

I once knew a fine, very idealistic young lady (I'll call her Martha) who lived more for other people than for herself. In fact, one of the reasons why she was attracted to Sid, the man who was to become her husband, was that for many years he had been very involved in community activism and welfare work in his spare time.

In the first weeks and months of marriage, she was apparently quite surprised to see some major changes in Sid's after-work routine. Very understandably -at least, many people would have thought so -he cut back sharply on his community volunteering in order to spend time with his new wife.

Martha, for her part, was flattered enough by his attention and grateful for his devoted help around the house. Unfortunately, her pleasure was marred by an inner conflict: what she had wanted in a husband was a sort of public hero -a man whose life revolved around his community, not around his hearth and home!

Did Martha manage to resolve the conflict? Yes, she did, and very successfully, but we'll return to that later. For the moment, it's enough to note the extreme complexity and sensitivity of the marriage dynamic, and the wide range of internal conflicts, doubts, frustrations and difficulties that threaten its stability.

It's not easy. But when our children are frustrating and difficult, we don't abandon them. Should our spouses barring extreme situations that require drastic measures be treated differently?

In today's world, almost everything we use -from diapers and paper plates to computers built for "planned obsolescence" -is disposable. It takes a dramatic shift in gears to understand and internalize the meaning of commitment.

But we're mature people, and we know -or should know -there are never worthwhile dividends without a significant investment. Commitment is not only a basic ingredient of happy and lasting relationships, but also a key to success and productivity in almost any of life's undertakings.

Given the undoubted benefits, its surprising that many of us are still struggling with the concept of commitment in relationships. Why is this so? When problems arise, why,

instead of working responsibly towards a solution, do we plump for simply opting out -for taking the path of least resistance?

One reason is our negative and unproductive attitudes. Another is the misconceptions that abound regarding the very nature of relationships.

Let's investigate this further.

Chapter Twelve

Give...and Give Again!

A woman once visited a counselor to ask a question about her marriage. The question itself is interesting and the answer her advisor gave her even more so. I suspect that many people would disagree with it, and some even take strong exception to it.

Personally, I think the counselor was spot on.

Sarah, the questioner's, husband, John, had been married before. John had to pay a certain sum every month as alimony. He had just started a new business and was passing through a very sticky patch, financially speaking.

The obligation to his ex-wife, coming on top of a thousand other things, was putting John under enormous pressure. Sarah was a working person and gladly helped to pay the family debts. She never thought twice about it

But should she be expected to contribute in this special case? Somehow, it just didn't seem right.

Surely, reasoned Sarah, her husband's financial commitment to a previous spouse had nothing to do with her? Yes, she and John were life partners and she was more than happy to share all his burdens. But even for what happened in a previous life, so to speak? Wasn't that going to far?

"I must confess I don't really understand your question," the counselor gently told Sarah after listening intently to her dilemma.

"You and John are husband and wife. John has a debt. He's struggling to pay it. What difference does it make what the debt is for? It's a debt, period! His problems are your problems. You're in this together. Why on earth shouldn't you help to pay the debt?"

The counselor paused and appeared to be deep in thought for a few seconds. Then, ignoring Sarah's puzzled looks, she added in a tone of uncompromising finality:

"If, after all, it's difficult for you to accept this, it must be that there's some deeper problem in your marriage..."

I would say there's a very powerful message here indeed. All the same, I don't want you to misunderstand the counselor -or me. So let's take a closer look at her comments and make sure that we have placed everything in the proper perspective.

My first point should be obvious, but I have to stress it just in case. She wasn't implying, by any means, that John was now given a license to sit back, put his legs up, and engage in relaxing contemplation about the higher meaning of life -all while his dear and ever obliging spouse works like a donkey to pay the price of his past. After all, it was his past, and his debt.

A second and related point is that, when we talk about husband and wife being full partners in the business of living, about sharing each other's burdens, financial or otherwise, no less than each other's joys, we are not saying for one moment that either party must contribute more than is reasonable.

In the case of our story, Sarah was a high-earning professional. In other instances, a wife, or even a husband, may bring in little or no income, for any of a number of reasons. In fact, it may not be desirable that she be working at all. One or other marriage partner may be limited in other ways.

But that hardly changes what I'm trying to put across here. We're talking of quality, rather than quantity. One can only do what one can, but it's the real desire to help that counts. That's what really makes the difference. And who said contributing means only money?

Shall I let you in on a little secret? I don't really like the use of the word "partner" in connection with marriage.

True, I do use it often, for want of a better term. Up to a point, it serves a good purpose, because a "partnership" does, in a certain sense, describe a marriage relationship, even a good one.

After all, we refer to parties who share a common interest in or responsibility for an enterprise as "partners", and here we are dealing with two partners -normally, life partners -who have contracted in to the enterprise of their own marriage.

Yet, therein lies my problem. I hardly think that an ideal marriage relationship is a "partnership" in the same way that we talk about a business partnership or anything similar. Very far from it.

Why? When we think of a partnership, we usually think about a formal, or even informal, contract between two parties. Something like a 50-50 sharing of duties and responsibilities. Any benefits arising are then strictly proportional to the burden shouldered. If the emphasis is on sharing, it's on sharing equally. As you put in, so you shall take out.

Is this marriage? Emphatically, no!

I know this may sound confusing, but let me put it this way. Do you have children? If so, do you love them?

"Absolutely!" I can hear you exclaim. You might well go on to say:

"Do you know how I love them? Just look at all the sacrifices we made for them. From the very moment they came into this world, my spouse and I gave them our all! Just as much as whimper from them in the middle of the night, and we were there to attend to their every need! Even now, they may disappoint us, anger us or hurt us, but we continue to cater to their slightest whim!

"Now, do you need any greater proof that we love them?"

Good. But why, precisely have you done so much for them? Is it because you love them so much?

Could be. But even more, I would say it's the other way round. You love them so intensely BECAUSE you've done so much for them!

This is nothing more or less than human nature. This is so much we can learn from this, if only we would think about it very carefully.

Sometimes, when two people begin to think about marrying each other, they think in terms of some business arrangement. Whether they verbally express it that way or not, their minds work something along these lines:

"You have needs and I have needs. Maybe, if I satisfy yours, you will satisfy mine. Let's see what deal we can work out..

"You wash the dishes, and I'll pay the rent. Sundays to Tuesdays I'll take out the garbage, and for the remainder of the week you will. Other duties will be divided by mutual consent. For every suit I buy, you can buy two pairs of shoes..."

Is this the marriage you want...really? If so, OK, good luck to you. You're probably in very good company!

But a big question still remains: how happy will you really be?

I read recently about a woman who, having been wedded a short while and having reluctantly concluded that married life was not all that it was cracked up to be, complained to an older and more experienced friend:

"Shouldn't my husband be going all out to please me? I mean, what's the point of getting married if he doesn't give me all the love I need? I might as well have remained single."

She must have been taken aback quite a bit with her friend's brief but firm reply:

" Love is not a scorecard on which each side tallies what he or she is doing for the other. If you're so obsessed with love, your only concern would be what you can do for him..."

The 50-50 Principle may look good in marriage manuals, but it has nothing to do with fruitful, satisfying relationships in real life.

Many people will tell you that for a happy marriage, you need what they describe as "give-and-take." Give-and-take? More likely, that's a recipe for disaster, not happiness.

What you need is "give and give". And give again. And again!

I don't deny that the best "recipe" can be abused by a manipulative partner, but exceptional situations do not disprove good rules.

In a normal relationship "give and give" is, without the slightest doubt, the royal road to happiness.

Many couples know this instinctively, whether they admit it -to themselves and others -or not. Why then, are they so slow in applying the golden rule in practice?

We'll discuss this in the next chapter.

Chapter Thirteen

Fast Track to Hell

The following tale is entirely imaginary. As always, I'm only relating it because it conveys, I believe, a very important message. So often, one story can drive a point home more effectively than thousands of words of moralizing.

Peter and Kate had been married for ten years or more, and they were always squabbling. It was a daily routine: either Peter was insulting Kate, or she was insulting him. In private or public, it appeared to make little difference; each trying to find a juicier epithet still to hurl at the other.

Their friends were more than mildly irritated by this unseemly behavior, but they had long given up any attempts at reforming them. If that's how Peter and Kate wanted to live their lives, they reasoned, the choice was theirs. It was only to be wondered at that they were still together after all these years, and their friends were at least thankful for that.

Then came the bombshell that would have shattered the peace -had there been such a thing!

Something of a medical nature had been bothering Kate for a while, until she realized she couldn't put off a visit to the doctor any longer. Even then, she was hardly expecting anything dramatic. So you can imagine how she felt when her doctor told her:

"Kate, I don't want to frighten you, but this is serious, possibly even life threatening. Fortunately, time is still on our side. Follow the treatment program to the letter, and hopefully, the danger will be averted. We'll assess everything again in two months. Meanwhile, get plenty of rest...and keep praying."

Do you think there was any bickering in that household over the next two months? No way! Peter's single-minded concern for his wife's health and comfort, if predictable, was complete. If Kate, her body racked with pain, did allow an occasional hurtful remark to pass her lips, Peter found it fairly easy to ignore it.

And ironically, this was, in some ways, the happiest period of the marriage!

A blissful feeling of intimacy, such as neither partner had dreamed possible, enveloped the unsuspecting couple. Peter's obsession with Kate's wellbeing left him no time for extraneous thoughts, and Kate's appreciation and admiration grew stronger day by day.

At the appointed time, they were back at the doctor's. Imagine the overwhelming relief when he pronounced:

"The danger's over!"

And when the next day dawned -it was back to business as usual! Petty bickering, name-calling, all kinds of verbal barbs and arrows. Well, each to their own kind!

But what is really going on here? Can a man and woman who spend their days in abusive mode, fighting each other tooth and nail, claim to be content in a perverse sort of way? How could a couple who had reached such heights slip back to square one literally overnight?

Well, it all boils down to one critical word of three letters. We call it the Ego. It's an intangible, somewhat elusive, component of the human psyche that's directly or indirectly responsible for more of the misery in this world than you might have ever imagined.

Moreover, I'm not only referring to misery inflicted on other people. Your Ego, when it's not channeled the way it should be, can so easily become an endless source of pain and unhappiness for you yourself!

Intrinsically, the Ego is not necessarily a bad thing. Quite the contrary. If by "Ego" we mean something like "self-esteem", it's indispensable. Many educated people

opine that we can't start to love others until we love ourselves first. That's perfectly true -if we're talking about the right kind of self-love.

But if "my Ego" means my needs, my honor, my sensitivities and my dignity always comes first (and probably also middle and last), we're taking the fast track to despair and destruction.

Imagine that the Internal Revenue Service in your country claimed that you owe \$1000 in tax arrears. You dispute this, and you challenge the tax people in court, but the court rules that they are right. Especially if you're a person of substantial means, you'd pay up with a shrug of the shoulders, tell yourself you can't win all the time, and forget all about it pretty quickly.

Now let's assume that instead of the government, an acquaintance, even a good friend, alleges that you are in his debt, for whatever reason, for the same sum of money.

Again, you go to court. Your alleged creditor pleads his case, you plead yours. The judge decides in his favor, and explains to you very patiently why the money rightfully belongs to your opponent. How do you react to your loss now ? Probably, even if you're very wealthy, you're not about to shrug it off so quickly this time!

Why not? Because you're not just losing money, but someone else is gaining at your expense. If there's anything worse than a property loss, it's an Ego loss! For most of us that's something extremely difficult to stomach!

I have a sneaking suspicion that, deep down, Peter loves Kate and Kate loves Peter. If one would disappear from the other's life, the abandoned one would suffer no end. Then why don't they live in peace together? That three-letter word does all the damage.

The Ego that insists that I'm right, that will not yield on the most trivial issue. The Ego that demands the honor that's due to me. The Ego that pursues justice at all costs, irrespective of everything that it knocks down in that way.

And to think that for the sake of that pompous ass of an Ego, we're prepared to sacrifice what is nearest and dearest to us!

In the next two chapters, we'll explore this topic a little more, and offer suggestions on how to banish the Ego (the obnoxious, not the positive side of it), from our lives for ever!

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Chapter Fourteen

Say, What's On Your Mind?

I wrote that we'll begin to discuss ways of taming the destructive side of the Ego in this chapter. First, though, I want to return to one of the basic ideas we touched on earlier: how poor communication (or worse still, not communicating at all) can cause unnecessary suffering.

Stan is an incurable romantic. Ever since he started courting Marge seriously, he has been sending or bringing her flowers. During the couple of weeks leading up to their wedding, he sent her a different arrangement every day. He continued this practice every Friday for a long time thereafter.

Marge had never been very much inclined towards sentimentalism and thought of herself as a strictly practical type. But it took several years for her to find the courage to speak up:

"You know, Stan, I really love you and I think it's terrific that you want to bring me flowers and you never miss a week, come hell or high water. But you know, I'm not really mad about flowers that much. Besides, they die so soon afterward that I feel guilty that we're wasting our money. If you insist on buying me something, I'd rather you saved up for a more lasting gift..."

This is a trivial case (fortunately), but if you're unable to tell your relationship partner what's on your mind in small matters, it's unlikely that you'll feel comfortable doing so in major areas of concern.

Hurt and angry couples often tell counselors "he should have known..." or "she should have realized...." when things are already at breaking point. But they don't explain how he should know, or how she should have realized. Is he or she a clairvoyant? Did anybody actually tell him or her?

This approach is comparable to that of someone who never makes grocery lists before she goes to the supermarket, but relies on her intuition. After eight shopping expeditions, she might have six bottles of etchup in her refrigerator. At other times, her family may have to go weeks on end without butter.

In intimate relationships, such an approach to life can be disastrous. Never rely on your intuition, and even less so, the intuition of your partner. Ask your soul mate what's on his or her mind, and don't be shy to tell him or her what's on yours!

Of course, there are also cases where, rather than simple neglect, deeper reasons lie behind the failure to communicate.

Simon comes from a family that was not only affluent, but also very stiff and formal, almost aristocratic, in its orientation. The house was spotlessly clean right around the clock. The dinner table was set every night with the finest quality silverware. Family members rarely raised their voices. Excessive emotion was strictly discouraged.

When Simon married Veronica, he took it for granted that the same kind of regimen would carry over into his own home.

Veronica, however, was a scion of a far more easygoing household. Her parent's home was almost always packed to the brim with relatives and guests. With all the bustle and commotion, order and cleanliness had to take second place. At mealtime, paper plates were the norm. Emotional outbursts were common. The children often screamed just to get themselves heard.

The opposing temperaments of these two may well have been one of the reasons they were attracted to each other in the first place. But Veronica, like Simon, came to the marriage with an underlying emotional expectation that her home would be run as her parent's home had been. Possibly, she feels it only subconsciously.

Does this mean that Simon and Veronica are now doomed to live out their days in, at best, an uneasy relationship punctuated with periodic flare-ups?

No, not necessarily, but the danger is there. Sometimes, in a situation like this, the partners are just not aware enough, or don't want to be, of where their opposite number is coming from.

Surprisingly, just as often they fail to recognize their own backgrounds. They know how they grew up, of course, but they don't appreciate how their early years influence their attitudes as adults. They just can't see how their own childhood experiences contribute to their irritability and impatience at the "strange" behavior of their spouses.

Then again, even if they do become aware of these things, Public Enemy Number One -the destructive Ego is often waiting in the wings, ready to pounce and take control of the situation.

"You've had your way all your life," it whispers in your ear, "so there's no earthly reason to change now. Stick to your guns; why must you always be the one to yield? Your partner knew very well who you are when he (or she) agreed to marry you!"

Fortunately, it doesn't have to end up that way. Many a successful marriage union has been built on the seemingly shaky foundation of two partners who enter the relationship with divergent expectations or contrasting perspectives on how the world should be run.

What are the success secrets of these fortunate couples? What are the requirements for happiness in a relationship where the potential for conflict, right from the very start, is inevitably high?

Self-awareness is one such requirement. You have to be sure in your own mind who you are, what you stand for, where you have come from and where you are going.

Even more, you have to distinguish between lifestyle practices of various types. On the one hand, you have principles that are central to your philosophy of life and cannot be compromised. On the other, you may have merely become habituated to doing some things in certain ways, with your Ego being the only force standing in the way of change.

Clearly, a healthy sense of humor would be another "success secret". No doubt, Simon and Martha's vastly different home backgrounds led to a lot of friction after the wedding, without either of them realizing what was at the root of it. But if the truth would finally dawn on them and they would be able to laugh about it together, working together towards solutions would probably be an easy next step.

A third, and arguably the most crucial, requirement brings us back to the story and warning with which we opened this chapter. Speak your mind (in a mature, respectful way, of course) and don't put it off! If you allow feelings of resentment to fester inside you, without bringing them out into the open, you are probably inviting disaster!

It took Marge a few years to decide to speak up that she wasn't crazy about flowers. However, the nature of the relatively insignificant misunderstanding was such that happily, things never reached a stage when she was boiling over with frustration over the affair.

Other spouses who opt to keep their mouths shut don't get away with it so easily. Jake's wife, Pat, was habitually late whenever, for whatever reason, they agreed to meet at some place. Jake would often arrange to meet Pat at the appointed destination a half hour earlier than the time he really intended, but all the tricks in the book didn't help.

Jake normally worked to a tight schedule, and Pat's consistent disregard for punctuality and apparent lack of consideration needled him no end. For all that, out of concern for Pat's feelings, he never said a word about it. However angry he felt, he would bite his lip and remain silent.

Until one day when they were due to arrive separately at an family gathering where Pat's presence was important. She eventually showed her face over an hour late. The bubble containing Jake's years of simmering frustration finally burst. He screamed and yelled, embarrassing not only Pat but all their relatives.

If there's one thing that we all have to learn, it's that we cannot drive our relationships on automatic pilot. On the contrary, we have to watch where we are headed, and make immediate course adjustments as necessary.

The sad case of Jake and his unpunctual wife is also instructive for another reason. From the start, Joe had recognized his potentially destructive Ego, and resolved not to let it have its own way. Just unfortunately, he went about the task in an inappropriate fashion.

How, and under what conditions, do we keep the Ego strictly in its place?

Chapter Fifteen

Taming the Destructive Ego

Polly had a four year old child who nearly every day would scream at her: "I want to kill you!" Polly tried her best to keep her cool but predictably, the point was soon reached when she would feel herself almost bursting with rage every time she heard the offensive words.

One day when he said them, she locked the child in his room for an hour. He yelled his lungs out all the while, but it didn't stop him from later saying the same thing again. Another day, Polly poured black pepper on the kid's tongue, and another time she tried washing his mouth out with soap. All these "remedies" may have helped her little son understand who the "boss" was, but for all that, he went on informing her regularly, in a nasty tone, that he wanted to kill her.

In desperation, Polly phoned up a friend who was already an experienced mother and asked her what she would do in such circumstances.

"As the oldest of three children, he probably feels left out of things," advised the friend. "I would say he's not hateful, he's just in pain. Don't respond to the words. Only respond to the pain."

The next day, true to form, the little chap shouted out the four dreaded words. Acting on her friend's advice, Polly hugged him, smiled and said: "Even if you want to kill me, I love you more than anything in the world."

Once the boy had recovered from the unexpected "shock" and the atmosphere was calmer, Polly tried to find out what was bothering him. That was the last time he ever uttered those words, or anything similar.

If you're like most people, you react almost every day to situations you perceive to be threatening in much the same way that Polly would respond to her little one's painful verbal jabs -only to get nowhere for your trouble!

Let's say that a man gets really hot under the collar while checking the family credit card statement, after noticing that his wife had bought some big ticket items

without his knowledge.

If she decides to give in to her first impulse, the lady might well yell back at him: "You old skinflint!" (or an even less flattering "compliment") and continue: "What's the matter with you? Aren't I entitled to a few decent clothes like any other woman?"

Alternatively, she resist the temptation of an impulsive response, calm down a little and say: "You're right. Neither of us should make a purchase without first consulting the other. You know, I'm really sorry. I didn't intend to hurt you."

And hopefully, that's the end of the incident.

(Note that I'm not talking about abusive personalities emotionally disturbed souls who will continue to insult and manipulate you no matter how gently you respond to them. With such people, you're probably better off keeping your distance. Here, though, we're presumably dealing with a rational, well disposed gentleman, just feeling the stress of having to be continually vigilant in the ongoing struggle to balance the family budget.)

Remember Martha, whom I introduced to you in an earlier chapter -the public-spirited bride who was deeply disappointed when her young husband didn't continue with the heavy community involvement for which he had acquired a reputation as a bachelor?

Martha tried to persuade him to return to his communal endeavors. This only served to alienate him, since took it as a sign that Martha didn't really appreciate all the attention he was showering upon her. Eventually, Martha also turned to an older and more experienced friend for advice.

"Lay off! Leave the poor man alone," counseled her friend. "Concentrate on improving yourself, not him. Work every day on refining and perfecting your character traits.

And in particular, always try to think of new things you could be doing for your husband -things that will make him a little happier, his life that much easier..."

Her friend was clearly an exponent of the "give, give and give" philosophy of marriage. At any rate, Martha was to reap great dividends from taking that advice to heart. From that day on, her marriage went from strength to strength.

Now, what do Martha, Polly and the lady whose husband didn't like her spending habits all have in common?

If you think about it, it boils down to this: each of them controlled their Ego. They subdued it, they harnessed it, they molded it to their advantage. Each of them had their own inner struggle, certainly. But ultimately, they did not allow the Ego to control them! Absolutely not.

It's a well known fact that when a person senses danger, the body pumps out stress hormones such as adrenaline. Adrenaline then cause the system to release fat into the bloodstream, which provides the extra energy the person needs to fight off the danger.

It's also well known that when a person gets angry, the body receives a false signal and starts producing adrenaline even in the absence of real danger. If this happens often enough, it can cause irreversible harm to the body.

The fascinating thing is that this pattern of events operates not only on the physical level. When you smell danger around the corner but none, in fact, exists, and you start to panic for no good reason, you unwittingly inflict on yourself real damage on the emotional plane as well.

And, as if the personal damage isn't bad enough, sometimes your relationship with someone close to you somehow gets caught up in the firing line.

Let's say you're standing in line at the supermarket checkout when somebody behind pushes you aside and strides up to the cashier. His very act of queue jumping is a red light for you and you get hopping mad. But before

your blood pressure has even had time to rise, the offender has already finished his transaction and you're free to proceed.

You stop to think. "Hey, my body and my emotions have just taken a terrible pounding, but why? Was I in any type of danger? No, it appears not. Then why the heck did I get so hot under the collar?"

"On second thoughts, though, there was a part of me that came under threat. But which part? Only my Ego, actually.....And for the sake of a bruised Ego I'm willing to get so excited over an inconsequential delay of precisely eighteen seconds?"

It's only your Ego that's hurt when you pass an acquaintance in the street and she returns your greeting with a blank stare. It's only your Ego that's hurt when a clerk at a government office yells at you for not bringing the right forms.

It's only your Ego that's hurt when you do something beyond the normal line of duty at the office, but nobody seems to appreciate it. And it's only your Ego that's hurt when you go out of your way to prepare something special for dinner, but as far as you know, your family don't even notice it.

Once you have learned to distinguish between real danger and mere ego-danger, you will have the key in your hands for vanquishing the troublesome Ego and confining it to its proper place for ever.

Let us now turn to circumstances under which it may be legitimate and desirable to allow our Egos a certain amount of freedom.

Chapter Sixteen

Time to Be Assertive

A couple of years ago, a reader of one of my e-zines emailed me with a seemingly desperate plea for help.

She wrote that she had been attending a course in communication skills, which included a lot of tips for becoming more assertive in everyday life. She was a conscientious student and practiced the techniques she learned every day. To her delight, she was finding that with strangers, at least, they were working pretty well.

"But I still have a problem," she lamented, "and the problem is my husband. Unfortunately...well, he's not so easy to sort out!"

The writer of the message (let's call her Sally), complained that when she and her husband arrive home after a day's work, she's always careful to inquire how he had found his day. "Yet, I'm very lucky if I get some sort of a grunt by way of reply."

"And then the fun really begins. That grunt is really the signal for a vicious verbal attack that might begin with: 'What on earth made you do such-and-such today? And since you insisted on carrying out such a lunatic act, why didn't you at least do it in a sensible way?' "

According to Sally, the conversation invariably ends with further biting criticism from her husband. He will berate her mercilessly for not doing what he instructed her to do, for not doing it properly, for spending too much time or money on it, for leaving the house in a mess, or for being too fussy about the house's cleanliness.

"Now, I know that it's really my fault. I should just be doing what they tell me to do in the course. I should be saying to him: 'I feel hurt when you talk to me in this way,' or, 'That's your opinion, but I'm afraid I don't agree with you.'

“Unfortunately, I find it very difficult to do that. I just can’t bring myself to it. So instead, I just stand there, full of shock, and say nothing. Then before long, my silence turns to frustration and anger.”

Sally added that she had also been experimenting with another technique that she had read about on the Internet.

“They said you should pretend that your lips are glued tightly together, so that you’re not tempted to say something you’ll regret, and before you know it, everything gets completely out of hand. Then you need to imagine you are covered in wax, and that all the destructive criticism is bouncing off the wax.

“And you know something, it’s working, at least to a degree. But what worries me is that this is being passive, and it’s much better to be assertive, isn’t it? Please, can you help me with some suggestions on how to apply assertiveness skills in a marital relationship?”

I do believe that the glued-lips technique is excellent but in the right circumstances.

We have just been discussing, in the last few chapters, the dangers, both for ourselves and for the people we interact with, of allowing our Egos to prevail over our better judgment. Several cases we encountered illustrate quite convincingly the great benefits for all concerned, when, in spite of all types of provocation, the Ego is kept under strict control.

Further, if, through force of circumstances, you’re tied into a relationship in which you are continually hurt, and there’s just no way to get through to the other party, such a strategy can be a lifesaver.

Not only can it save you from a lot of misery, but I’ll go even further. Under some conditions, there may be no greater way of showing love and concern than remaining silent!

But when you practice it, you’re walking on a tightrope.

With the most honorable of motives, keeping silent can backfire, as we saw in the unfortunate case of Jake, whose wife, Pat, was habitually late for appointments.

Even worse, you might well be mistaking heroism for cowardice. Many of us have heard reports like this one:

"A neighbor of mine used to drop in whenever I was busy with all sorts of tasks. Without fail, she would find something to criticize in what I was doing. At first it drove me mad, even though I knew she really meant well. But I decided to bear it in silence, and was determined not to let her behavior undermine my sense of self-worth. Inside, though, I still resented her.

"Then one day, she made an innocent remark, and I exploded with all my suppressed rage. Yes, I thought I was humble, but in reality I was cowardly. There's so much pain on both sides now, that I wonder if we can ever have a normal relationship again!"

How should this lady have dealt with her nosy neighbor? How, indeed, can Sally become more assertive in communicating with her husband?

Let's try to find the answers.

Chapter Seventeen

Giving Is Not Giving In!

If Sally, whose letter we quoted in the last chapter, has learned so much about assertiveness techniques, as she claims, and has even successfully applied them in practice -what are the roadblocks that prevent her from using them with her own husband?

I have never met Sally personally, and know nothing about her background, her personality, her inhibitions and her fears, all of which, of course, may have a strong bearing on the issue. (In her message, though, she does come across as a warm and intelligent person.)

I do know, however, that her problem is far from unique. I can only suggest a few factors which, if they don't apply in her situation, do apply in many similar ones.

The last thing I want is that what happened to Jake and Pat or to the lady with the meddlesome neighbor should happen to Sally, or to her husband. When all's said and done, they're the most important people in each other's lives. (Well, if they aren't, they should be!)

Assertiveness, unfortunately, is often confused with impudence or aggression. In reality, they're very different. Aggressive people actively seek conflict because they need to feel dominant or superior. Control of others gives them a sense of importance. The goal of assertive people, on the other hand is not to feed their vanity or pump up the Ego.

Ideally, assertive folk are dominated not by hate, but by love. In optimum circumstances, their desire is not to dominate or control, but to preserve and enhance their capacity to give of themselves.

When they fight, it's only to protect ideals and values they strongly believe in. When they try to protect their dignity as human beings, not to mention their physical and mental health, they are simultaneously protecting their ability to give to those whom they love.

Aggressive people are destructive. Assertive people, on the other hand, are constructive!

What stops you from being assertive, even when you very badly want to be?

A major reason is fear. It seems to me that this fear often intensifies when the other party is someone very close to you.

You might be afraid of being condemned -as incompetent, stupid, lazy, inconsiderate, or whatever. When someone makes an unreasonable demand on you, you don't want to be thought of as selfish. If somebody calls you inefficient, you might be afraid of being called something worse if you answer back.

In all these cases -or so you think to yourself -you would end up feeling rejected or unloved. If the other person is a particularly significant one in your life, this a situation you would especially want to avoid.

What will happen -you might reason subconsciously if my husband or wife (or whoever) shuts me out of his or her life completely? Or does something even worse?

You might fear hurting the other persons' feelings, regardless of how he or she has hurt yours. Strangely enough, people who are especially vulnerable and afraid of rejection, often assume that others have the same fears. "If I speak honestly with him, I'll destroy him," you might think.

Occasionally, these fears are justified. Let us say you have a boss who abuses you. If you speak up, a real danger exists that he might fire you. In such a case, you have to decide: either suffer in silence, or find another job.

But far more frequently, these fears have little substantial basis. Usually, they wiggle their way into your thought system through a process of conditioning, having its origins possibly even in early or later childhood. Once they are there, they can be extremely hard to dislodge.

What's the solution? I can only say this. One needs to practice. And keep on practicing.

Sally, you know you can do it, and you will! You, too, are created in the Divine image. Your sense of self-worth and your emotional stability are important to you. They cannot be negotiated away.

Why? Precisely because you're not selfish! Like all people, you have so much to give -and you badly want to give.

But don't make a mistake! Giving is not giving in. By not giving in, you are only ensuring that you will continue to give in the fullest sense.

Chapter Eighteen

Dump That Negative Baggage!

In these concluding chapters of this e-book, I'd like to devote some space to a couple of topics that might not seem at first, to have too much to do with communication and relationship building.

Their relevance to our theme is very real, though, as will become clearer as we proceed. In fact, we have already caught more than a passing glimpse at how what I can call our "internal makeup" -our upbringing and previous life experiences, our attitudes, prejudices and inhibitions -influences the way we communicate and interact with others.

I read about someone who had struggled with math in elementary school, so much so that she had even lost sleep over her difficulties in keeping pace with the lessons. Having sensed the child's frustration, her mother had taken her aside and offered some well-meaning encouragement:

"Look, no one in our family is good in math. I was poor at math and your sister isn't good in math. No wonder you're having a hard time. You shouldn't worry. I'm sure you'll be good at something else."

Well, that certainly sounds comforting. Nevertheless, the former struggling schoolgirl bewailed the fact that more than 30 years later, she still had, in her estimation, the mathematical ability of a 10 year old. Are you really surprised?

Unhelpful or unproductive messages that young people receive from their elders take many different forms. A friend told me that his 11 year old had been uncharacteristically moody and subdued for a few weeks. It had taken him a while to figure out that something was worrying the lad at school.

At first, the boy insisted that everything was OK, but eventually he blurted it all out. He explained sadly that his teacher kept upsetting him with an ongoing stream of comments like:

"Another poor grade in the test this week. You could do much better, if you really wanted to."

"You say you find it difficult to concentrate in class. If you really wanted to, I'm certain you could..."

"Oh Dad," moaned the hapless pupil. "I just don't understand this 'if you wanted to' business. Can it be possible? Does my teacher really believe I don't care? Surely, he must know how much I'd like to be a better student, if only I could?"

Fortunately, this story had a happy ending. The father had a friendly, heart to heart chat with the teacher, who understood where he might have been making a mistake. Before long, the teacher's feedback had changed to:

"Your grade in this week's test was two percent better. Now that you're going up, perhaps you can manage another two percent hike next week?"

"You concentrated well for a solid twenty minutes this morning. You see yourself you can do it. Now, just try to manage for another ten minutes."

And so we have one happy, eager pupil and one very proud teacher!

I think the lessons of these incidents are clear enough. Interestingly, I have another friend who recently retired after a lifetime of teaching in schools where -so unlike those that dominate the media nowadays -the young students are mostly refined and serious, and hail from the best homes. I was surprised to hear my friend confess:

"Usually, a small child arrives for his first day of school with an excellent self-image. And so often, that's the end of the story!"

We cannot turn the clock back or change the facts of history. But that doesn't mean we can't change ourselves. People whose self-image took quite a battering in their youth so often believe they have to live with the consequences forever, but it doesn't have to be that way.

Some adults become so bitter and resentful inside about everything and anything, are so oversensitive and easily offended by everybody but nobody in particular, that they feel they can no longer function normally. The more fortunate among them eventually consult psychologists or similar professionals, who get to work by helping their patients to explore their past and pinpoint the source of their anger.

As people go through life, they accumulate all sorts of negative baggage.

One angry patient would often go to therapy sessions accompanied by her father. During one of the sessions, she mentioned that her father appeared to be quite friendly and caring, but for the past fifteen years he had hardly visited her home and had refused all invitations to eat with her family. This upset her very much.

The therapist later discovered that fifteen years previously, her patient had said something to hurt her father's feelings, and he had vowed not to eat in her house until he received an apology.

What the father didn't realize was that his daughter was not even aware of this decision. When she was told about this, she apologized immediately -and the father broke down in tears.

Getting rid of excess psychological baggage and the intense but chronic pain it causes is never easy. It usually requires persistent effort over an extended period. However, no amount of effort should be too much for us once we really appreciate the incalculable benefits of such an exercise for ourselves, our loved ones and all those around us.

But even if we're not yet ready to undertake this arduous task of self-cleansing and healing, at least we should train ourselves to be sensitive to the pain, existing and potential, of the other folk in our lives.

We can all take a lesson, each of us in our own way, from the teacher who finally learned how to inspire his difficult pupil to ever greater heights. If only we really knew how much is in our hands!

When your spouse, child or other family member decides to give you a special surprise and you say something like: "That was nice of you to make dinner," resist the temptation of immediately adding: "but why didn't you clean up the kitchen?" Never qualify your statement: "I appreciate that you did the grocery shopping, especially when you have so much on your mind right now," with an inevitable: "but why did you select potatoes that are half rotten?"

By now, we well understand how positive expressions of praise, pleasure and appreciation, well targeted and delivered at the right times, accomplish so much more than the mildest rebukes and the gentlest nagging. Don't spoil those valuable compliments, however, by inserting a "but" or two. Qualified praise is no praise.

And never tire of saying those two simple words: "Thank you."

Chapter Nineteen

Taming the Destructive Ego

Yes, the right words, together with the empathy and sensitivity that influence how you choose them, make all the difference in the world. Simply put, words make or break. It might help us to internalize this truism if we take a look at why so many people just don't take it seriously.

What do you do when you wake up in the morning with acute toothache? You rush to the dentist and the first thing he does is jab a needle into your gums. Hopefully, the ache is gone even before he lays a finger on that troublesome tooth.

Aren't anesthetics wonderful? Now, imagine you were created with a kind of natural version, that washed your mouth continuously so that you never got toothache in the first place. Wouldn't that be great?

No, probably not, because you'd never know when a tooth needed attention, until it would be far too late.

Unfortunately, this isn't as far fetched as you might think. Just as there are anesthetics of the body, you get anesthetics for the mind as well. And usually, mental anesthetics work much like the imaginary natural variety we just described.

Not too long ago, an English teacher at a private American school decided to use the old television series, "Alfred Hitchcock Presents" to help teach his class about plot development in creative writing.

Once a week, he would play a movie in the series, then stop the show before the end. He would then ask his students to write their own endings. They liked the idea so much that they suggested they read their work aloud in class.

What the teacher heard -to use his own words "horrified and sickened" him. After hearing the first few students, he put a stop to the reading aloud.

Later, he led a frank class discussion about the very explicit imagery of violence he had found in the papers. The students quickly insisted out that media violence didn't affect them at all because the graphic scenes they saw on TV and films were "fake".

Their teacher then asked them how they would feel if they saw a dog on TV being riddled with bullets.

"How horrible!" they cried out in unison.

The teacher concluded that unlike the human carnage they regularly witnessed on TV, his students had found animal deaths appalling because they had seldom seen it.

Over the years, these children had become almost completely desensitized to violence. Today, for the first time, they realized it. Thankfully, the anesthetic was starting to wear off.

Now, the truth is that most human beings, over the course of time, allow themselves to be desensitized against all sorts of other things as well.

Sometimes, it's good. For example, we eventually "get over" a loss, or a traumatic episode gradually recedes from our memories. More often, it's anything but good.

A prime example of harmful mental anesthesia stems from the remarkable talent that humans have for hurting each other with their speech.

Sure, it's the victims who feel the pain, but it's the attackers who somehow manage to "anesthetize" themselves, so that they no longer have to think about the consequences of their actions. Sometimes the desensitization is so complete that they even go on to shift the blame for their verbal abuse onto the victims: "Aw come on, why on earth are you so touchy? Anyone would think I hit you with a sledgehammer, or something!"

At times, our verbal barbs are deliberate. It may be that feelings of inadequacy or inferiority induce us to assert our power over others. Frustration over real or imagined deficiencies, or anxiety over events we cannot control, may spur us on to develop and use a full arsenal of purposeful innuendoes, backhanded compliments, slurs and insults. Shouting at our fellows is a lot more comfortable than shouting at ourselves.

This impulse to put others down in order to bestow upon ourselves a sense of superiority or power, or as a diversion from our own shortcomings and problems, is something many of us just can't resist. On the other hand, offending others is sometimes the last thing we want, yet somehow, we manage to do us nonetheless.

In previous chapters, we saw this happening with people who come to advise or comfort their friends or loved ones with well intentioned but poorly timed comments. For a example, a family member of a friend may be seriously ill. Almost instinctively, we offer the reassurance: "Don't worry, everything will be just fine!"

Our friend is not comforted. Just the opposite. She's wondering whether anything will be the same again. It takes experience, and more than a little practice, in accordance with the guidelines we suggested then, to choose words that will have the right effect.

But why must we wait for our friends to experience stress or severe trauma before we decide to carefully weigh our words? What do you do when your friend buys an expensive new outfit, and asks you a week later how you like it?

If you believe the outfit doesn't suit her very well, but it's already too late to do anything about it, do you tell her what you think? Or, do you find some way to evade the question, or to put a positive spin on the event, thereby sparing your friend unnecessary distress?

If you really want to spread love in the world, taking great care with what comes out of your mouth is one way to do it.

Perhaps you remember that haunting and defiant chant with which you and your friends probably taunted each other during your schooldays:

“Sticks and stones may break your bones, but words will never hurt me!”

Do you believe it? By this point, I certainly hope not!

Granted, words may rarely be able to break bones. But they do worse. They can break our hearts, our spirits, even our reputations.

And yes, our ability to develop and maintain meaningful relationships.

Yet, there’s no need to end on a negative note. If the faculty of speech is indeed so very powerful when it’s abused, it must be ten times more potent when it’s employed the way it’s meant to be.

If you can destroy so much with words, just imagine what you can create with them.

The choice is yours. Go to it! It’s time to build the beautiful edifice of your dreams.

Concluding Comments

The Fire Inside You

Of all the forms of human misery, probably the most widespread is discord in the home.

And of all the forms of human happiness, probably the most intense is domestic bliss.

Which would you choose? Well, that's a question that should hardly require an answer.

Yet, being the lethargic and change-resisting creatures that we are, we often settle for a state of affairs that's less than perfect. Because it's easier to take the path of least resistance, we may shrug our shoulders and opt for a situation that just passes as tolerable.

But as I said in the last chapter, the choice is yours!

Yes, I could write on and on -more information, more insights, more stories. Perhaps, G-d willing, I will do so in future e-books. I will certainly continue to discuss relationship and communication subjects in my e-zine Effective Communication.

Now, however, is the time for tough decisions. The time to decide that you and your loved ones deserve more than second best.

And after the decisions, is the time for action.

This is the time to fan, once and for all, the fire that's already burning, whether you know it or not, somewhere inside you. The time to feed it and stoke it until it rises higher and higher and spreads in all directions. It's not a fire of death and destruction, Heaven forbid, but a fire of life, enthusiasm, desire and determination.

It's the fire that will ignite that passion for perfection that might bring lasting happiness and self-fulfillment to you, your husband or wife, your children or parents, your friends and associates.

Please write and tell me how you enjoyed this e-book, and share with me your suggestions for topics I should write about in future.

And make a regular habit of visiting [Hodu.com](http://hodu.com) at <http://hodu.com> for current insights and commentary, and well-researched and authoritative strategies, relating to everything we talked about in this little book. (See further details below).

Remember: I'm rooting for your success in your personal life and in all your endeavors!

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As I mentioned at the beginning of this book, [Hodu.com](http://hodu.com) is a comprehensive, one-stop Web destination with one overriding objective – to help you sharpen your communication, relationship and social skills on all levels and in all kinds of settings - your family unit, your workplace, and in the community at large.

The site has many topical sections, and for your convenience, I'm repeating here (with direct links) those that are most relevant to the subject matter of this e-book:

[Assertiveness Skills](#)

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For other topics relating to communication skills in everyday life, please visit the [Main Article Menu](#).

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A substantial portion of our site is devoted to the vast and important subject of **BUSINESS COMMUNICATION**.

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...and various other topics. For details, go to the [Business Communication Main Menu](#).

I also run a **Blog** on the site, featuring my personal insights and commentary on current developments relating to our site's theme – effective communication, sound human relationships, and all-round personal development. If you like, you can keep up to date on the latest [Blog](#) posts by RSS with your favorite Reader.

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Azriel Winnett